Natural Resources and Environmental Issues

Volume 0 *Wilderness Areas: Their Impact* Article 12

1990

Concept of wilderness, and its challenge to savage capitalism: redefining the dictum of Henry David Thoreau

R. W. Behan
School of Forestry, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff

THE CONCEPT OF WILDERNESS, AND ITS CHALLENGE TO SAVAGE CAPITALISM: Redefining the Dictum of Henry David Thoreau

R.W. Behan
School of Forestry, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Arizona,

INTRODUCTION

"In wildness is the preservation of the world." Probably no other bon mot is quoted more often at conferences such as this one. The observation made by Henry David Thoreau a century ago maintains its appeal and mystique to this day. It serves us presently as the title Mike Frome chose for his thoughtful, and thought-provoking, paper.

Mike's paper does two other things that are unique, I believe, among the collection of presentations we've heard: he recognizes and asserts the inseparability of man and nature, and he deplores the increasingly inequitable distribution of wealth and well being among the world's people. **Wilderness is not an unrelated issue; and by that I do not mean we need to invade wilderness to provide jobs and economic development.**

No, I mean instead we need to consider carefully the man/nature relationship as we talk about wilderness, and we also need to be concerned with the well being of people and how wilderness can affect that. I have prepared the remarks to follow attempting to do both, but I relied on Mike's paper for inspiration and incentive. I hope you don't see us both simply as a couple of old-line liberals approaching incipient middle age.

OVERVIEW

I've been asked to provide a "political perspective" in summarizing the papers of this conference. To do so, I will define politics broadly: politics is the set of institutions for the construction of enforceable rules, by which a society can sanction or prohibit any human action.

Consider: we have prohibited anyone, in either individual or corporate incarnations, from logging, mining, or otherwise "developing" some 91 million acres of the U.S. Landscape, and we did it through politics. We call these acres "wilderness."

The **concept** of wilderness, it seems to me, embodies a number of interrelated ideas: an appreciation for "natural" systems — what I will call later in this paper "spontaneity"; the respect for the complexities — and the other, non-human citizens — of spontaneous systems; more than a bit of wonder and humility; and the capacity for and exercise of self-restraint to create and maintain the integrity of wilderness.

But the wilderness concept also embraces a great anomaly, I believe: we have yet to sort out unequivocally, or to agree upon consensually, the relationship of man to nature. Mike Frome sees no separation, and I don't think I do, either; I'll try to address this issue later.

"Savage capitalism" is a term I ran across in Andre Carothers' editorial in the current issue of **Greenpeace** magazine. At its simplest, it is capitalism pursued with a single-valued objective: maximum net revenue, with little if any regard for either social or environmental consequences. With a few exceptions, perhaps (IBM tries not to lay off its workers), I believe the term accurately characterizes much of the economic system in the United States today. (Carothers makes a persuasive case that it characterizes much of the industrialized world; but I will restrict my remarks largely to the circumstances and conditions in the U.S.)

I believe Savage Capitalism has driven the American consumer to a state of hyper-consumption. There are important and tragic exceptions, but most of us would be better off physically, and I suspect emotionally and even spiritually, if we consumed less. An economist would say we are consuming in the range of negative marginal returns. You might also say we are consuming great quantities of "hypergoods:" those which are not only surplus to our real well being, but arguably detract from it.

Why would any rational person continue on this course? I believe most of us live in a state of "Consumer Euphoria," in which we have been literally hyped into behaving that way. We are persuaded to participate, and we do, in a system of high-pressure, high-velocity, straightline production, consumption, and disposal – from the mines and forests of our country, through the polluting mills and factories, directly to the landfills, with consumer goods residing in the utility stream sometimes only for a matter of hours. Consider paper and plastic grocery sacks, for example.

The **concept** of wilderness, the notion of precluding **consciously** the production/consumption/disposal chain from land to landfill, might well be a potent weapon to level against Savage Capitalism. The cellulose-production of 91 million acres that we know of, for example, will never clog any landfills, nor appear in our mailboxes as our daily ration of redundant catalogs. (Persuading us to buy, beyond doubt, another increment of hypergoods.)

Later in this paper I will make the case for classifying more acres of our public lands as Wilderness. I will not rely on aesthetic reasons, nor spiritual reasons, nor biological reasons, nor other such orthodoxy. We need consciously and deliberately to pre-empt commodity resources in Wilderness, I believe, so they cannot be used otherwise in the production of hypergoods.

That may be a dramatic, perhaps a radical suggestion. It is also dangerous. It is neither unerringly effective, nor demonstrably and reliably just: corporate producers have alternate sources of raw materials — many in third-world countries — and wilderness-pre-emption may well be a futile exercise in suboptimization, with counterproductive results. It is a tactic to be used with extreme caution, and the judicious anticipation of second-order consequences.

So I will offer a far less dramatic, far more conservative, and ultimately, profoundly, far more effective complementary weapon in the struggle against Savage Capitalism. To maintain a degree of suspense, and to insure a modicum of attentive listening, I will postpone suggesting it until later.

ECONOMICS, POLITICS, AND THE STATUS OF THE BIOPHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

I feel compelled, in my undergraduate teaching, to describe the contours and dynamics of the economic and political institutions in which my students, neophytic professional foresters, will be immersed, and the consequent effects on the biophysical environment. I rely on a number of heroic generalizations to do so.

Perhaps my students are inexperienced in intellectual debate. Perhaps they are conditioned to accept their teachers as indisputable. Perhaps

they see very quickly and clearly the genius of my characterizations. In any case, they rarely complain and virtually never disagree.

Particularly regarding undergraduate students, one equates silence with consent at considerable peril, of course. But let me try my generalizations on you.

The market — and marketing — institutions of American capitalism encourage in society at large, and in each of us as individuals, materialism, consumption, hedonism, narcissism, and impatience — the elements of Consumer Euphoria. Given single-valued objectives on the part of producers, Savage Capitalism drives us to the hyper-consumption of hypergoods. I believe we have become a nation of Consumption Junkies, with consequent, direct, and massive environmental and social impacts.

Consider the fast-food hamburger. Journalist Tom Knepher assembled the following story, and published it last November 9 in a Sedona, Arizona, newspaper.

To put a "Quarter-Pounder" in front of you, four pounds of grain and soybeans have been fed to a cow. By the time you get the result, 90% of the protein, 99% of the carbohydrates, and 100% of the dietary fiber in the grain has disappeared--into the cow, as it awaits slaughter and conversion into fat-laced hamburger. Thousands of people around the world starve each day, while here in the U.S. we feed to livestock 80% of the domestically-grown corn and 95% of the oats.

Not all the beef is grown in the U.S. In Central and South America, 5,200 square miles of tropical rainforest are burned each year to produce the 200 million pounds of beef we import, mostly for the fast food industry.

More than two-thirds of the rainforest in Costa Rica have been converted to pastureland. This comprises over half the agricultural land in that country. It is owned by less than 2,000 individuals and corporations.

Back home again, more than half the water consumed in the U.S. each year is devoted to livestock production. If you'd like to know the extent of the water-development subsidies provided to Western agriculture, read Marc Reisner's alarming book, Cadillac Desert. Some growers pay as little as $3.50 per acre-foot, and at that rate there is virtually no incentive to use water carefully. That quarter-pounder accounts for 625 gallons.

Clearly, the input-side to the fast food industry imposes stupefying impacts on the biophysical environment. So does the output side. The McDonalds chain produces enough plastic-foam trash, manufactured with CFC's, to fill both World Trade Towers in New York. Every day.

Last week, our stockbroker sent a flyer, imploring my wife and me to invest in McDonalds. The growth rate of that company has been phenomenal. In 1989 it opened a new restaurant every 16 hours. In 1990 it will open a new one every 15. Its first in Moscow was headline news.

The social consequences of the fast food industry are as severe as the environmental effects. Most employees receive minimum wage, and few are allowed a full 40-hour workweek--and so receive no fringe benefits. Women and minorities rarely are awarded franchises, particularly beyond the limits of minority-dominated communities. Typically about three-quarters of the expenditures of a given restaurant are made outside the community in which it is located, but locally-owned restaurants are displaced.

Do you deserve a break today? Does that message, hammered at us dozens of times a day, encourage materialism, consumption, hedonism, narcissism, and impatience?

Clearly, Big Mac's make no sense, in any terms of environmental, social, or individual well-being. They make enormously good sense,

in terms of immediate and hugely positive cash flow for the McDonalds Corporation. That is Savage Capitalism, I submit; but please notice a critical proviso. Savage Capitalism at McDonalds depends on the willingness, of millions of people each day, to buy a meal at the double arches. I'll have more to say about that later.

For now, let's look at the political system, and the heroic generalizations my students suffer in that regard. American political institutions, I tell them, accommodate the expression of spiritualism, not materialism; of preservation and restraint, not consumption; of moderation, not hedonism; of humility, not narcissism; and of patience. Political institutions make possible the Social Transcendence of Consumer Euphoria, and we have some fine examples.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 is just one, and it illustrates my final generality: the state of the physical environment is determined by the tension between the economic and political systems.

Left alone, and relying for its vitality on our willingness to consume and our capacity for Euphoria, the market system would put into the production/consumption/disposal stream the resources of the entire American landscape.

But our collective spiritualism intervened, and overrode our individual materialism. As Mike Frome said, the Wilderness Act serves "...as a symbol of hope and reason, of respect for the earth as the source of respect for each other." Our collective capacity for preservation and restraint overrode our individual propensity to consume, and on 91 million acres we have precluded the mining and harvesting of commodity resources — the raw materials for hypergoods. The Social Transcendence of Consumer Euphoria has been accomplished, at least on those wilderness acres.

Almost. Livestock grazing continues in designated wilderness, as provided by the law, on lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. I believe it is time to amend the Wilderness Act to prohibit it. We need deliberately to preclude, I think, the production of red meat — arguably a conspicuous hypergood — on those lands. The second-order consequences are manageable under any one of a dozen alternative policies to compensate the current permit holders. But using the Gila Wilderness, or the High Uintas, or the Selway-Bitterroot to provide ourselves with Big Macs is a travesty.

THE MAN/NATURE ANOMALY IN THE WILDERNESS CONCEPT

A dichotomy between man and nature, I believe, is evident, in one of a number of ways, in most the papers we've heard. Some assume the dichotomy, and take it essentially as given; some make judgments about it, and do not favor the human component; at least one author — Mike Frome — denies it; others — Mr. Hall and Mr. Morris, speaking for the management agencies — largely ignore the dichotomy in discussing the problems of wilderness management; and Tom Bonnicksen deplores it. It may be well to seek some agreement on this issue, but I am not altogether sanguine about achieving much.

Professor McCool's essay staked out the no-compromise, almost absolutist territory, I believe. Wilderness is the domain of ecology, i.e., "nature," working uninterrupted by human machinations or artifacts. Thus Professor McCool is comfortable in suggesting the prohibition of hunting and fishing in wilderness: it is simply a human intervention in natural, "ecological" processes.

I am troubled by this ecological orthodoxy. Most biological science begins with someone looking out the window, so to speak, to see what is going on. Observation of "reality" is the point of departure; hypotheses are constructed to explain the observed phenomena, and experiments are conducted to test the hypotheses. Eventually "theories" appear in textbooks, as

evolving explanations of reality, presumably with increasing reliability.

Orthodox ecology seems to have begun, however, not with an observation of "reality" but with the reading of a pre-existing textbook. Surely the first ecologists, had they initially looked out a window, would have observed human beings busily at work in various landscapes, sometimes benevolently, sometimes otherwise.

The theories we find in contemporary ecology texts, however, ignore systematically this very conspicuous component. They explain what will happen, on various subsets of the planetary surface, if and only if one species, Homo sapiens, is utterly absent.

I find this a notable oversight. Explaining the behavior of systems in the remarkably unreal absence of the single most influential species may provide an interesting datum, but the exclusion is clearly arbitrary. Why not exclude sperm whales? Or some species of nematode? Including "the contriving mind and the cunning hand of man" in ecological theory certainly complicates the field of inquiry, but its systematic exclusion is difficult to explain, much less to defend.

Professor McCool's paper wisely makes no normative judgments, but in his perception of wilderness, man has to be absent.

I believe man must be absent from Professor Romme's wilderness, too. His ecology varies from Professor McCool's in ways I was unable to distinguish. The dichotomy is clear and complete; Professor Romme's "natural" realm does not and cannot accommodate the actions and artifacts of man.

I found Mr. Wilcoves's paper appealing. It was an intelligent, articulate rebuttal of the game management paradigm, a wildlife counterpart to the entreaty of the quintessential timber beast. A sustained yield of meat, Mr. Wilcove argues, is no more to be appreciated, ipso facto, than a sustained yield of sawlogs. The entire system, not any single product, is the important focal point of concern. Wilderness areas are not meant to be game farms, and they are not meant to be timber plantations. Agreed. But Mr. Wilcove's wilderness, and Mr. Wilcove's "nature," it seems to me, cannot accommodate the influence of man. The dichotomy is undiminished.

Professor Knight's paper struck me as excellent, but normal, science. In documenting the impacts of recreation use on biodiversity, he has given us some solid information at the margin; the datum is separate and independent "nature" once again, but we can understand the consequences of human activity in a "controlled experiment," accordingly. The dichotomy is once again assumed, taken as given; I trust it originates in Professor Knight's orthodox ecology.

Professor Knight's paper, however, displays a common feature of the man/nature dichotomy I find especially troubling. He makes a normative, and pejorative, comment about the human component. "All of these effects of recreational use on biodiversity can be considered detrimental because they represent deviations from natural conditions."

The adoration of "nature" and the denigration of man is a familiar theme. It may have sprung from Alexander Pope describing a natural landscape "...where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile." In any event, I believe ecology — and science in general — should stop where normative judgments begin.

Now should we talk about theology? It is indeed easy to adore nature and deprecate man. Much in our culture, our literature, and our history can lead us to do so. Certainly the intellectual division of man expressly from the rest of nature sets the stage for comparisons and for judgments to be made. Nature-worship becomes, in today's lingo, a piece of cake, and "theological management" a distinct possibility.

I agree with Tom Bonnicksen we should be very careful about doing this in the management of national parks in general, and wilderness areas in particular, because I do not think "man" and "nature" are separate at all.

WILDERNESS IS NATURAL; SO IS A SHOPPING MALL

I would rather distinguish human actions, decision-determined actions, from biophysically spontaneous actions, and consider them both "natural." It follows, I believe, that human intervention in spontaneous actions is neither good nor bad in principle.

Knowing what will happen in a biophysical system if we don't do anything is interesting and valuable. Wilderness can provide this datum. We may prefer the spontaneous outcome, instead of the results of human intervention.

We have about 10,000 years of history, however — since the invention of tools — that argues to the contrary. There are, apparently, some isolated cultures that still depend on the spontaneous behavior of their environment: most of mankind opted for intervention long ago. I don't think anyone needs to apologize — the cultures who intervene or those who don't.

Wilderness is described in law today as a place where "man is a visitor who does not remain." We choose not to live there. That description also applies to churches, museums, theaters, libraries, and shopping malls. I consider them all "natural." The difference has something to do with spontaneous actions and the presence or absence of interventions.

I believe the entire surface of the globe has been, and continues to be influenced by human decisions. We decide to intervene in spontaneous processes — or we decide not to. The status of every square foot of the Earth's surface is determined by human decisions AND the spontaneous processes operating there. Downtown Los Angeles. The "Inaccessible Area" of Antarctica — in which we recently chose to intervene. Iowa cornfields. The John Muir Wilderness.

There is just one "biosocial system," I believe, (the term is Tom Bonnicksen's). "Wilderness" exists not only because it displays biophysical spontaneity, but also because we have chosen not to intervene.

I believe we have to think about and manage wilderness accordingly.

REDEFINING THOREAU'S DICTUM, AND CONFRONTING SAVAGE CAPITALISM

Will the preservation of the world be found in wildness? Will mankind ultimately survive there? We don't know, at least I don't know, what Thoreau really meant, but maybe it was something close to wilderness as we know it today.

If so, Mr. Thoreau can rest easily at peace. Our technology for surviving in the wilderness is as sophisticated as any we have. Outside magazine hawks it every month: exotic tents, space-age plastic boots, synthetic insulation in parkas and sleeping bags, and an exquisite, gourmet cuisine that stops just short of freeze-dried caviar. Hypergoods all, I believe. Hyper-consumption is alive and well in the back country. Savage Capitalism is at work there, too.

There are other measures. A box of Wheaties today costs 84% more than it did in 1981. The price of the wheat in the box has declined by 33% in that much time. In 1976, the richest 1% of American people owned 19.2% of the nation's wealth. By 1988 they owned 36%. Mike Frome's allegations are borne out in facts.

Is Thoreau's dictum the solution? It could be, if we redefined "wildness" or "wilderness" as a biosocial concept, a blend of spontaneous

processes and human decisions not to intervene. That way, we are not limited to classifying only the lands "where the hand of man has never touched foot." "Reconstituted wilderness" is not only possible, but palatable — and we have the Eastern Wilderness Act as a striking example. We can have as much of that sort of wilderness as we want. I believe, to short-circuit the prospect of hyper-consumption, we should have a lot more.

Collectively, working through political institutions, we can constrain the raw material supply for the production of hypergoods, through the pre-emption of commodity resources. That does indeed demonstrate collective restraint, but Savage Capitalism is well represented in the political arena — witness the Reagan years — and initiatives there will always be contested. Commodity-resource pre-emption is always difficult, then, and please remember my caveat earlier about second-order consequences.

The potency of the wilderness challenge lies only partially in the political arena and in collective action. When we adopt as individuals the wisdom of the wilderness concept — the respect for spontaneous processes and for other creatures, and in particular the restraint this calls for — another and far more potent weapon emerges.

We can, I think we must constrain the demand for hypergoods.

That is a far more effective weapon in the conflict with Savage Capitalism. To indulge a contemporary cliche, just say no to the consumption of goods that detract materially from the quality of your life. Start with a Big Mac. (Most of us really do need, and want, to lose a few pounds; we'd be better off if we ate less. That's the circumstance of hyper-consumption.)

It won't be easy.

Americans, it has been noted, go to the market place not merely to buy. We go to find out what it is we want, and then buy. This is the Euphoric Consumer acquiring hypergoods, and the behavior, I believe, has been carefully conditioned and nurtured.

"Free" markets, of course, are not free. They are driven by corporate policies on products, quantities, and prices, and dominated by persuasion — from the most imaginative, creative minds in our society, whose ingenious and beguiling advertisements hammer us all day long, from billboards, television, newspapers, magazines, radio, movie screens, and Lord knows our personal mailboxes and telephones. The messages are continuous, seductive, and effective: they are the source of hyper-consumption in our society, I believe.

Still, we have to be willing to buy hypergoods. The responsibility ultimately is ours.

If we take the time to learn where hypergoods come from — Big Macs from devastated tropical rain forests or the grass in the Gila Wilderness; if we consider the social consequences — gross inequities in the concentration of wealth; if we realize how much better we could live if we consumed less — the inescapable up side of hyper-consumption; Savage Capitalism is rendered powerless.

Wilderness — as landscape and idea — has a lot to offer.

Consider this: Americans consume about 50 million tons of paper each year. Ask yourself how much of that comes to your house in the form of grocery sacks, redundant packaging, and unwanted mail. Could you cut your pro-rata share in half? If everyone did, roughly two million acres of timberland could be classified as wilderness instead. That's about the size of Yellowstone National Park.